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Challenges encountered by academic library staff regarding the processing of requested information resources

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Abstract

This article explores the challenges encountered by academic library staff regarding the handling or processing of online requests from library clients. The researcher outlined the challenges identified by the respondents and provided suitable recommendations. This study employed a quantitative approach that enabled the researcher to generalise the findings. Data was intended to be collected from 39 library staff, but 27 responded. The questionnaire that comprised of closed and open-ended questions was used as an instrument of data collection. The findings revealed that most of the academic libraries had challenges with information technology tools that are used to process online requests as they are mostly offline. However, the respondents indicated many challenges that they encounter, and expect that the library management take appropriate action to enhance service delivery most especially in the area of information needs of the library clients.

Keywords: Academic library, information resources, library staff, online request

1. Introduction

The emergence, usage, and dependence of information technology in academic libraries has brought benefits to the academic libraries, library staff, and library clients but has also presented challenges. The library staff encountered challenges regarding the processing of the online request for information from the library clients. Academic libraries uploaded and subscribed to various scholarly databases to enable access and download of library clients' information resources. Furthermore, academic libraries

introduced online request services whereby library clients can request information resources. This is considered innovation-driven by the information technology development and ensures that library clients do not have to struggle to find information resources to meet their information needs. Therefore, the availability and use of online request services and accessing and downloading information resources at the comfort of their homes are intended to broaden the scope of available information resources and add value by digitising information resources to be accessed online at any time anywhere (Ugwu & Orsu 2017). These information resources are available in different formats such as e-journals, e-books, e-reserves, Institutional Repository, e-dictionaries and other online information resources that the faculties and the libraries consider relevant to be read and accessed by the library clients. However, library clients that are unable to access and download information resources on their own are encouraged to use online request services. Despite the effort made by academic libraries and higher learning institutions, library staff still encounter challenges in processing online requests for information resources. These challenges have resulted in library staff developing a negative attitude towards information technology, which also led to a negative attitude towards learning, lack of motivation, lack of time, lack of knowledge about learning activities, and the lack of new and creative ideas (Ugwu & Orsu 2017).

2. Problem statement

Given the above contextual information, it is apparent that much has been done to improve service delivery in academic libraries to speed up the delivery of the requested information resources by aligning library activities with information technology. However, the library staff encountered challenges concerning processing requests for information resources and delivering them within a turn-around time (Raubenheimer 2014:126). This goes against the institution's vision of improving library service delivery by providing an online platform for library clients to request information resources. For the online request system to be effective, both the library staff and the library clients need to acquire tech-savvy potential. The library clients are encouraged to use the online request facility for information resources that cannot be accessed online such as hardcopies (books, CD-ROMS, book excerpts, and copies of journal articles). In this regard, the library clients are encouraged to be self-sufficient

to search the library catalogue, determine the availability of required information resources, request the information resources and download information resources. The online request system's rationale is to minimise delay for providing information resources and ease the library clients for visiting the library to loan hardcopies that are not physically available on shelves. It is essential to deliver the requested information resources on time, as these materials are intended to be used for assignments, study, and research. However, the speedy delivery of information resources depends on the availability of the requested materials at the time of the request.

In practice, it seems as if there is a problem in this regard. Some library staff is unable to render quality library service as they lack requisite information technology skills. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the challenges encountered by academic library staff concerning the application and utilisation of information technologies to process online requests of library clients' information resources.

3. Purpose and Objective

The purpose of this study was to investigate the challenges encountered by academic library staff concerning the application and utilisation of information technologies to process the online request within the turn-around time.

The objective of this study was to:

- Establish the challenges the academic library clients face in the effective utilisation of information technologies to process online requests from library clients.

4. Research question

- What are the challenges faced by academic library staff that affecting the turn-around time of processing online requests of information resources from the library clients?

5. Research methodology

This study's research methodology to investigate the academic library staff's challenges is the quantitative approach. The quantitative approach is a method that researchers use to test objective theories by examining the relationships between variables (Creswell, 2014:4). It is concerned with collecting data and information that can be summarised, presented and analysed numerically in graphs, tables, and charts (Golafshani 2003:598; Matthews & Ross 2010:141). This study gathered theoretical information through a literature review. Sources consulted for the literature review included books, journal articles, and websites. Empirical data was collected by using a questionnaire. The whole population (39 respondents) was intended to be studied to increase the accuracy of the findings, rather than using a restricted sample (Bless, Higson-Smith & Sithole 2013:174). The questionnaire, which comprised of both open and closed-ended questions were analysed and interpreted quantitatively. The graphs and tables were interpreted to provide a clear understanding of the data they represent.

6. Literature review

Regardless of the inspiring advantages of information technology, library staff still encounter some challenges in using this platform (Ugwu & Orsu 2017). Various studies investigated academic library staff challenges regarding information technology used to render library and information services (Daramola 2016; Omeluzor 2014; Omosekejimi, Eghoworo & Ogo 2015). The significant challenges encountered by the library staff are lack of information technology skills and competencies, lack of search skills, interacting with the library webpage, recurrent power failure due to load shedding (Dube 2016; Dube 2021).

Academic libraries are making efforts to meet their clients' information needs and make certain that they can obtain information resources online, but they still face numerous challenges. One of the challenges is that library clients are trained to be self-sufficient in accessing and retrieving online information resources but cannot still recognise if the information they have accessed or used is part of the library's collection (Dube 2016). In this regard, library staff needs to train library clients to instil self-sufficiency. On the contrary, the library also has challenges adapting to new

technological features to ensure that library clients use the library's databases and online library services and recognise those information resources and services offered by their library.

The popularity of free Google products such as the Google search engine, Google Books and Google Scholar has contributed to the challenges mentioned above. Library clients do not search for information resources using the subscribed databases. Instead, they opt to search for information on Google, which is more user-friendly than most scholarly databases (Ya 2015:14). Therefore, library clients treat these Google products as their first portal for information. They only use academic library databases when they do not find what they are looking for on Google. This challenges academic libraries' search methods and results in the decline of databases' usage, for which academic libraries have paid much money to benefit their clients. Therefore, the library staff ensures that online library services are available to the library clients. In contrast, the library clients struggle to access and download information resources without the library staff's assistance.

The use of Google products is influenced by mobile devices such as smartphones, tablets, iPads, and other mobile devices, which library clients are widely using to conduct research (Ya 2015:12). These mobile devices impact how information is accessed and retrieved, possibly because many people own internet-enabled mobile devices. Accessing and retrieving information on mobile devices could be viewed as an advantage to library clients, as it is convenient for them to search for information. At the same time, however, they promote Google products more than their library resources. This means the databases that the library is subscribed to are not being used.

The preservation of online information resources is another challenge for academic library staff. Ya (2015:22) believes that it is not easy to preserve online information for a long time. This is because online information in various formats is published at such a fast pace, to the extent that academic libraries have no idea how this information will be managed and preserved. Online information such as voice and films are usually preserved in audio and video carriers because of their ability to be stored in the form of CDs, audio cassettes, and video cassettes. However, information preserved in audio

and video format might be inaccessible in a few years because of updating the storage media. Microsoft Office software, such as Microsoft Word, Microsoft Excel, and Microsoft PowerPoint, can store information in PDF, Graphics Interchange Format (GIF), and Joint Photographic Expert Group (JPEG). Online information resources such as e-journals, e-reserves, e-theses, and e-books should be saved in PDF format, which is the most preferred format, as it is considered reliable and stable. It is recommended that information should be stored in two or more different mediums as a backup.

Library staff continues to have increased expectations about the available information resources in and through the library (Agyen-Gyasi, Lamptey & Frempong 2010:5). They want speedy delivery of information resources requested from the library and through Interlibrary Loan (ILL). They do not understand that a book can be seen as 'available' on the library catalogue but cannot be found physically on the shelves. The book could be on the tables used by library clients or missing but not updated on the system. Therefore, many library clients today opt to use Google, as they struggle to interact with the library databases.

As discussed before, in this era of information and knowledge, a lack of information technology skills and competencies leads to poor service delivery because library clients' information needs are met through the usage of information technology applications and tools. Importantly, library managers need to support library staff by providing them with opportunities to attend workshops, seminars, or any other training that will be useful. This will enable library staff to show initiative, be creative, and develop new ideas that can be introduced to improve service delivery by utilising information technology tools.

Based on the challenges mentioned above, it is evident that library staff experience challenges concerning the introduction of computers and current technologies, which are affecting the daily operations of academic libraries (Emezie & Nwaohiri, 2013:35; Jestin & Parameswari, 2002). In this technological environment, library staff must cooperate with a broader range of people, including faculties, Information and Communication Technologies personnel, graphic designers, and archivists.

7. Research findings

Table 1 below indicates the questionnaire response rate.

Table 1: Questionnaire response rate

Targeted respondents	Targeted number	Number of returned questionnaires	Number of unreturned questionnaires
Academic library staff	39	27 (69%)	12 (31%)

7.1 Problems and Challenges Encountered in Processing Requests

The participants were asked about the challenges they encountered when processing online requests from library clients. The findings are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Challenges encountered by the academic library staff

Number of respondents	Responses
21	The information technology tools are always slow and sometimes not working at all, and this affects the processing of requests
15	The request services should have been divided into four sub-sections. Each section should be independent
6	Library management does not want to take the input of library staff into consideration
4	The processes and procedures are constantly changing, and it is difficult to cope with and adapt to the changes
9	Too many responsibilities
1	The information technology tools are not user-friendly
1	Lack of training and commitment of the library staff
5	The library staff have to respond to non-library-related queries, which consume most of the time allocated for processing requests

3	The process of handling online requests is too complicated to understand and is constantly changing
1	Library clients send requests without providing all the bibliographic information, which could assist the library staff in processing the requests more quickly
4	Library clients who request information resources and want to collect them at the main campus or their nearest library branch do not collect the requested items
2	The post office causes delays and frequently goes on strike
7	The library has many information technology systems or tools that are used to process requests, and these systems do not communicate with each other
8	Lack of proper training, especially the newly employed library staff
9	Library staff are tasked with many responsibilities and cannot cope with the load
12	Shortage of library staff
1	Lack of cooperation among the library staff

The problem mentioned by most of the library staff was the issue of the slow and/or malfunctioning information technology tools. If the information technology tools were not working, it meant that the library clients would not receive the library staff's expected service, as they depended on those systems to meet the clients' information needs. Another primary concern that was voiced was that the request services should have been divided into four independent sub-sections; the shortage of library staff and that they were tasked with many responsibilities is one of the challenges mentioned. This might be because the library staff felt that they were tasked with many responsibilities and failed to cope with the demands.

The minority of the respondents also mentioned the lack of proper training, especially for newly employed library staff; lack of cooperation amongst the library staff; the post office causes delays and frequently goes on strike; the library management does not want to consider the input of library staff; the processes and procedures are constantly changing, and it is difficult to cope with and adapt to the changes; the information

technology tools are not user-friendly; lack of training and commitment of the library staff; library clients send requests without providing all the bibliographic information, which could assist the library staff in processing the requests more quickly; no cooperation among the library staff.

7.2 Ratings for the problems and challenges encountered by the library staff

The researcher outlined eight variables according to which the participants had to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with the variable based on their challenges when processing online requests. They were asked to choose between "disagree," "neither disagree nor agree," "agree" as indicated in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Ratings for the problems and challenges encountered by the library staff

Statement	Disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	Agree
I experience challenges when processing requests from library clients	9 (36%)	1 (4%)	17 (60%)
I always ask for help from the supervisors or other colleagues when processing online requests	9 (36%)	1 (4%)	17 (60%)
I always call the library clients if I do not understand their requests or if insufficient information is provided	6 (22%)	2 (7%)	19 (71%)
I usually check the Student System for information resources that the library clients did not receive	16 (59%)	5 (19%)	6 (22%)
I report challenges to my supervisor or line manager that I encounter when processing requests	3 (11%)	1 (4%)	23 (85%)

I always deal with complaints from the library clients when I did not provide them with the services that they needed	8 (29%)	6 (22%)	13 (49%)
The online request service is an efficient and effective means of providing quality services to library clients	4 (15%)	1 (4%)	22 (82%)
Information technology has a negative impact on the quality of services for library clients	16 (59%)	1 (4%)	10 (37%)

The findings indicated in Table 3 signify that eight variables were outlined for the library staff to assess the problems and challenges encountered when processing online requests. The majority of library staff highlighted that they encountered six of the eight challenges mentioned. If the library staff constantly encounters these challenges in processing requested information resources, it might delay providing information resources.

7.3 Ratings for the challenges that contributed negatively to the quality of library services

The researcher sought to determine the challenges that contributed negatively to the quality of service at the library. The researcher outlined seven variables that contributed negatively to library services quality. They were asked to choose between "disagree," "neither disagree nor agree," "agree" as depicted in Table 4 below.

Table 4: The challenges that contributed negatively to the quality of library services

Challenges	Disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	Agree
System offline	2 (7%)	1 (4%)	24 (89%)

System slow response	2 (8%)	2 (7%)	23 (86%)
Lack of IT infrastructure	15 (56%)	4 (15%)	8 (29%)
Lack of information technology skills by the library staff	8 (40%)	10 (37%)	9 (34%)
Lack of access to the internet by the library clients	13 (48%)	3 (11%)	11 (41%)
Lack of information technology skills by Library clients	7 (26%)	7 (26%)	13 (48%)
Service procedures	3 (11%)	2 (7%)	22 (82%)

The findings indicated in Table 4 show that seven variables were given for the library staff to rate themselves. Based on the findings, system offline, system slow response and service procedure were rated high by the participants. This denotes that these were the major three significant challenges affecting the productivity of library staff.

7.4 Comments about the problems and challenges encountered when processing online requests

The participants were further asked if there were anything they would like to say concerning the problems and challenges when processing online requests from library clients. The findings are presented in Table 5 below.

Table 5: Comments about the problems and challenges encountered when processing online requests

Number of participants	Responses
17	The systems are always slow and are sometimes not working at all
6	New requests hang on the system without a known reason

2	Information technology makes the library staff look incompetent on their jobs when clients always query about requests that take time to be processed and sometimes get lost on the way
4	Sometimes the system sends messages to library clients that their requests are canceled, and the library staff do not generate these messages
5	The slowness of the systems disadvantages the library staff to do their jobs effectively
1	Library management should provide every library staff with student system's passwords to solve all the problems they may come across instead of depending on a few library staff
2	Most library clients do not have access to faxes, computers, and internet connections and stay far from the post office. Therefore, these clients are not accommodated in this IT era.
4	Information and Communication Technologies services at the academic library should be improved

The majority of the participants, namely 17, commented that systems are always slow and are sometimes not working. This implies that the slowness of the systems was a significant concern.

8. Challenges and recommendations

Challenges	Recommendations
The processes and procedures for handling or processing online requests were constantly changing, and it was difficult to cope with and adapt to the changes. Change is needed and acceptable, especially in this technological era, where academic libraries depend on technology to meet library clients' information needs. Library	The library should stick to the same processes and procedures for processing online requests. It becomes difficult for the library staff to cope with and adapt to all the changes. Learning new ways of doing things is good, but not when it is done constantly, as the staff will be confused and end up processing requests in different ways. Moreover, the

<p>staff should learn to embrace change and acquire as much knowledge as possible to provide quality library and information services. The researcher assumed that the library management changed the processes and procedures for handling or processing online requests because they believed that they might develop a better strategy for speeding up information resources delivery.</p>	<p>supervisors should ensure that the library staff does their jobs as expected, instead of changing the processes and procedures for handling requests. This should not be regarded as a solution, especially when the changes are done to accommodate library staff who are not committed to their job. Simultaneously, this does not mean that change is not good, but there must be valid reasons for changing the working processes and procedures. The library staff become confused and consider change a challenge, resulting in them adopting different ways of handling or processing, and delivering information resources.</p>
<p>The information technology tools that are used to handle or process requests from library clients were not user-friendly. This might be because the tools were not integrated to handle or process requests from library clients more effectively and efficiently. The disadvantage of using multiple information technology tools was that when one system was down, the library staff could not carry out their duties. This was one of the challenges that made the library staff lose confidence in their professional ability, as they always received criticism and unnecessary queries and complaints from library clients. The researcher did not consider criticism, queries and</p>	<p>As this study indicated that the most crucial challenges were the non-commitment of library staff, slowness or malfunctioning of the information technology tools, and the fact that these information technology tools are not integrated, the library should consider upgrading or changing the information technology tools used to process online requests. The information technology tools failed the library staff, thereby affecting the library clients, who could not receive their requested information resources on time. The delay in information resource provision led to the library clients not meeting deadlines</p>

<p>complaints as a problem from the library clients' side. Instead, the researcher assumed that this was caused by the library staff's negative attitudes and lack of commitment. Committed library staff should learn from criticism, queries, and complaints instead of losing focus.</p>	<p>concerning their assignments and research projects.</p>
<p>The library depended on the Post Office to deliver printed information resources requested by library clients. On the one hand, the Post Office delays and strikes made the library staff seem as if they were incompetent in their work because of the nature of the queries and complaints they received from library clients. Some of the queries were difficult for library staff to resolve when the information resources were no longer in their hands. On the other hand, the library clients might also lose interest in requesting information resources that might take time to reach them or not reach them at all. This might also cause library clients to become self-reliant, and library staff could then be left without a job.</p>	<p>Post Office delays and strikes are also considered a problem or challenge, leading to delays in delivering information resources. Therefore, the researcher recommends the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The library should encourage library clients to stay near the library branches to collect information resources from the branches to avoid delays and inconveniences, as post office strike without giving notice to the library. The post office strikes have a negative effect on the library's operations, as they are the only Post Office in the country that the library relies on for the delivery of information resources. • Regarding prisoners, the library should make special arrangements with prisons to allocate library staff who can receive couriered information resources on behalf of the prisoners.

<p>The slowness and/or malfunctioning of the information technology tools affected both the processing and delivery of the requested information resources and the library staff's performance. It seemed as if the library Information and Communication Technology personnel were not committed enough to resolve the slowness and/or malfunctioning of the information technology tools. They do not treat the call as a matter of urgency. Instead, they seldom answered the phone or took the time to come and resolve the matter. Therefore, library staff and supervisors no longer felt motivated to log calls when there is a problem with the library systems.</p>	<p>The library should ensure that the Information and Communication Technology personnel is competent enough to handle both minor and major problems related to the information technology tools used to handle or process online requests. It is a severe problem when the information technology tools are out of order for a long time, without any resolution. It was also mentioned during the data collection process that the new requests from library clients sometimes get stuck in the system without the Information and Communication Technology personnel being aware of it. The library staff discovered these problems when they received queries and complaints about the delay in delivering the requested information resources. It is recommended that the Information and Communication Technology personnel monitor the information technology tools regularly to avoid these kinds of problems and detect any malfunctioning of the systems before the library clients submit complaints that could ruin the university's reputation.</p>
<p>The shortage of library staff was another problem facing the library staff. The shortage of library staff might cause them to work under pressure to meet their information needs. However, this</p>	<p>Together with the library staff, the library should promote self-service so that library clients can access and download online information resources instead of depending on library staff to provide</p>

could not be regarded as a valid reason for poor service delivery. According to the researcher, there was sufficient library staff responsible for handling or processing online requests, and received requests were not supposed to take more than 24 hours without being processed.	them with information resources that are available online. Since the study found that the slowness or malfunctioning of information technology tools was the cause of delays in the provision of requested information resources and that there were not enough staff to process requests from library clients, this will enable clients to not depend totally on library staff to provide them with information resources that are available online. However, some library staff mentioned that they felt threatened by information technologies, leading to job losses.
The library clients send requests without all the necessary bibliographic information, which would help the library staff process requests more quickly. The request form for online requests required the library clients to complete all the bibliographic information and indicate their preferred delivery mode. Providing all the required bibliographic information helps the library staff ensure that the library staff delivers the correct information resources.	When clients send requests with insufficient bibliographic information, this might lead to cancellation or delay. It is recommended that library clients know the consequences of not providing enough bibliographic information for their requests. Besides, the system should not allow them to send an incomplete request form for online requests.

9. Conclusion

The study unmasks the underlying the challenges encountered by the library staff. Generally, the library staff depends on information technology to process online the numerous requests from library clients, consequently meeting their information needs. Most of the challenges discovered require urgent attention as the findings indicated

that the library systems are mostly malfunctioning. The post office does not deliver the requested information resources promptly. The library staff use multiple library systems to process requests of information resources. This might put a strain on the library staff as they receive complaints about poor service delivery and the processes and procedures for handling or processing online requests were constantly changing, and it was difficult to cope with and adapt to the changes. To deal with these challenges, further studies should be conducted using a qualitative approach and include library managers to understand the subject matter.

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